

It's a Horse Race

By Ronnie Brandenburg

A local orchid show is a beautiful sight to behold no matter how many times you have attended one. The experience would gladden the heart of anyone and capture the attention of everyone wanting to grow orchids. However, this eye-catching creation does not automatically appear – it takes months of planning, days of hard work by the Show Committee, and a significant outlay of funds for the sponsoring society. It also requires American Orchid Society judges to make it complete – to reward the plants, the exhibitors, and the Show Committee for their efforts. Yogi Berra said, “You can observe a lot just by watching.” The following suggestions have come from observing judging at many orchid shows.

Anyone who has been on a Show Committee remembers the crisis *du jour* and cherishes these war stories to be relived and relished later – sometimes, only much later. It may help to associate an orchid show with life and remember Kathleen Norris' quote: “Life is easier to take than you'd think; all that is necessary is to accept the impossible, do without the indispensable, and bear the intolerable.” However, the original goal is to have a perfect show – and that includes perfect judging. (No, not perfect orchid judges – even most judges will admit that is a total impossibility.) With this in mind, I would like to suggest some things that may aid and abet the judging portion of an orchid show.

It takes many years to become an AOS accredited judge and a constant effort to maintain judging competency. This requires subscribing to and studying many publications, attending judging workshops and seminars every year, and traveling to regions other than your own to increase your knowledge. Of course, this adds up to a large expenditure in time and money, neither of which is unlimited. Therefore, please invite judges to your show as early as possible so the event can be added to their busy schedules. Invite as many as you can to ensure adequate judging personnel because, to paraphrase a noted English poet, the plans of mice and men (and women) oft do go astray. It is not fun (or fast) to judge 600 to 1,000 entries with only six accredited judges. Obviously, the attendees and exhibitors at your orchid show are anxiously waiting for the results of their hard work, and judges want to provide the best possible results for them.

We also need a space dedicated to judging the show. It should contain several tables (one for each team, one for the judging chair and the reference material, and one to collect the plants nominated for AOS point scoring). Each table should have many chairs available for the judges to use for AOS point scoring – our feet are not as young as they used to be and judging floors are frequently hard. It would also be appreciated if coffee or cold drinks (and maybe a cookie or two) were available to keep up the judges' energy levels.

The AOS judging kit should be ordered a minimum of eight weeks prior to the show and be available for the judging chair. After all, the job is not done until the paperwork has been completed – if it is not recorded, it did not happen.

Clerks are extremely important to a judging team and it helps if there are at least two clerks for each one. This provides an opportunity for the judges to meet local society members (who usually fill the clerking positions) and perhaps pass on knowledge gleaned from our experience to these members. Each clerk should have a layout of the exhibits and be familiar with it prior to the start of judging – to know that exhibit 35A is between exhibits 3 and 4 (No matter how well the staging chair plans, orchid shows are dynamic and things are often done at the last minute.) They should also have colorful stickers or some way to identify plants that the judges nominate for AOS point scoring and keep a list of these plants – which makes it easier to pull these plants from the exhibits when it is time for this part of the judging.

It helps to have entries arranged by exhibit number within a class. This may consist of tags glued to a manila folder or a computerized list as some societies are doing. A count of the entries by class is helpful to the judging chair to equalize the efforts of the teams so they may all finish at approximately the same time.

It is extremely important to have reference material available for the judges. There will be many years of judging experience (even hundreds) available at a show but no judge (or group of judges) is acquainted with all the thousands of species and hybrids. We follow the principle that “to know all things is not permitted.” Therefore, at a minimum, the following books and periodicals are strongly recommended:

Register of Awards and Supplements (Volumes I-VI)

Awards Quarterly (to date and filed by volumes)

American Orchid Society Awards (the latest edition of this combined index)

Sander's List of Orchid Hybrids (all volumes)

Bishop's Interim List of Orchid Hybrids (latest edition)

Encyclopaedia of Cultivated Orchids by Alex Hawkes (out of print)

Manual of Cultivated Orchid Species by Helmut Bechtel, Phillip Cribb and Edmund Launert

Technology is bringing the orchid-judging process into the 21st century. Many judging centers (and judges) have (and would bring) portable computers with software such as Wildcatt Orchids, and Orchid Database or the RHS Orchid Registration if contacted in time. (Of course, this means that electrical outlets would also have to be available, as all batteries need to be recharged in time.) These software packages help judges research a plant's parentage, the family tree, and other awards, which may have been given to the cross and its parents. All of this information is used to determine if a plant is awardable and what is the status of the award.

Perhaps the one most important thing, though, is lighting. If at all possible, schedule judging during the day. There is nothing that will surpass natural light – and it's free. Obviously, if that is impossible, color-correcting lights must be available in order for judges to assess the true colors of the blooms. After all, with the massive effort involved in producing a show, it would be a shame if the orchids were not given every chance to shine.

Mark Twain said, "It is not best that we think alike, it is difference of opinion which makes horse races." Therefore, it is not imperative that all shows include these suggestions. However, AOS judges and judging chairs will be most grateful for any tender loving care that you can provide and will look forward to judging your next show.

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